

# RE:SCULPT I

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## Paula Murray: Form and (Non) Function

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Paula Murray, Abandoned Shell

Medium specificity again.

It's something that can be hard to get away from for some artists. Trueness to materials can exert a very strong aesthetic pull, and ceramics is one field in which medium specificity has had a truly overwhelming grip on things. Perhaps too overwhelming a grip.

I'm not saying that disparagingly, or as a way of dismissing such an approach (though I do think the notion that medium specificity is virtually sacrosanct isn't useful). Indeed, it has, of course, led to remarkable work, and the enquiry into clay's limitations is hardly near any sort of end as ceramists continue to push boundaries.

Well, there are boundaries, and then there are boundaries. Step beyond the insistence (or need, or tradition, or whatever you might want to call it) of medium specificity and other things can happen.

Enter Paula Murray ([www.paulamurray.ca](http://www.paulamurray.ca)). She's a Canadian sculptor working in the realm of ceramics who has a background in the sciences. She studied ceramics at the renowned Sheridan College in Toronto, and did a number of residencies at the equally renowned Banff Centre in the Canadian Rocky Mountains.



Paula Murray, Sanctuary #14

This is an artist who knows her way around clay, and who has chosen to push its boundaries in an unconventional way. By that I mean she's no purist – there is no absolutism in her work that locks it within the constraints of her chosen medium. Instead, she's invested it with ideas and approaches and material from the outside. Call it a kind of renewal, if you will, but know that Paula Murray is no traditionalist.

What's she's done is combined the strengths of clay with a non-natural material: Murray mixes porcelain and fiberglass. Heresy, no doubt, to some. But think about it. Porcelain gave ceramists the ability to make artefacts – usually vessels – that were stronger and thinner than earthenware and stoneware. Porcelain lent the natural unwieldiness of clay and elegance and lightness it had hitherto been denied. So, how about mixing in an industrial product like fiberglass and see where it goes?

Why not? Heretics take things in interesting directions, and that is exactly what Murray has done with her work. By literally mixing things up, introducing a kind of contamination into the purity of clay, she's taken the medium in sculptural directions it otherwise would – and could – never have gone.



Paula Murray, All that Remains (detail)

See, the last big revolution in ceramics would have been porcelain, and really, there's nothing new about it. But it revolutionized the field, allowing the making of artifacts that were stronger, lighter, thinner than its country cousins earthenware and stoneware. Murray, then, is continuing on in that vein to create sculptural objects otherwise unattainable via the current norms and conventions of clay.

Here's something of an analogy to work with: think of cinnamon sticks, those thin shells of cinnamon bark curled around one another. Fragile things.

Murray's wall-mounted work *Hollow Reeds* (2012) aesthetically articulate an iteration of this sculptural shape, thin porcelain forms – reeds – twisted around themselves (unlike the cinnamon analogy, which rather falls apart at this point), impossibly thin by ceramic

standards, and yet...here they be, rising and falling in their showing, gathered together as a meaningful whole upon a gallery wall.

Sanctuary 14 (also 2012) perhaps better represents my cinnamon analogy. It comprises a series of vertical porcelain tubes – small diameter, and each of which is segmented – arranged on a narrow shelf. They're not precisely straight, not imitative of the manufactured but rather of the natural world. Like the trunks of trees (can't seem to let go of that cinnamon analogy, can I?), slightly bent, imperfect...meaningful and lovely, and way beyond what unadulterated clay can do.



Paula Murray, Abandoned Shell #2

And the thing is, natural forms predominate in Murray's work. And why not? The pliancy of her heretical porcelain allows her to push towards the organic in interesting and beautiful ways. Like in her Abandoned Shell series (2008), and particularly #2 of the series. Horizontally exhibited, it's like a peeling of a thing, curled up and split from, oh I don't know, being dried out maybe, an oblong form, a distended oval tapered towards each end. Something creaturely might once have lived here. Its surface has the classical crackle of

some ceramic glazes, but here it goes beyond the superficial and is part and parcel of a decaying form. The crackle permeates through the porcelain. It's fracture we are confronted with, the achingly elegant beauty of decay and entropy. Something creaturely may have indeed lived here once, and shed this shell, this carapace, as it grew. But didn't. Murray made this, capturing and expressing a narrative in its delicate shape.



Paula Murray, Hollow Reeds

And she made *All That Remains* (2005). More overtly a shell-like thing (it has a resemblance to the fascinating geometry of the shell of the Nautilus), it's the porcelain remnants of a coiled form that's been broken asunder, left behind. More decay, more aesthetic residue of entropy, but thereby evidence of a creation of something akin to a container that is a home.

And that's where Paula Murray's sculpture is important. To work with clay is to inevitably be faced with the imperatives and aesthetics of the container, the vessel. Well, Murray's work is that of the vessel, but certainly not the caricaturish utile thing we tend to assume and expect.

Murray tells us of the aftermath of the vessel, of the container that no longer contains and which has thereby transcended the narrow limitations of form and function and become the teller of narrative tales.

By [Gil McElroy](#)